



radical democracy

interview

bonnie raines
civil rights/peace activist
people's commission to
investigate the fbi

David Olson interviews Bonnie Raines

A long time civil rights and peace activist, Bonnie is a former member of the secretive activist group, the Citizens' Commission to Investigate the FBI. In 1971, the group stole classified documents exposing widespread illegal behaviour by the FBI, including the Bureau's domestic counter-intelligence program, or COINTELPRO. The unconstitutional FBI program focused on disrupting the Civil Rights, New Left, Native American and Black Liberation movements. Tactics included illegal surveillance, harassment, break-ins, smear campaigns, use of force, and even assassination.

The burglar/activists were never caught, and remained anonymous for almost forty-five years. A documentary film and book about the break-in and its aftermath have been recently released.

Bonnie has served as Executive Director for Educating Communities for Parenting, as policy associate for Public Citizens for Children and Youth, and is a board member of Philadelphia Citizens for Children and Youth.

She is married to John Raines, who was also a member of the Citizen's Commission.

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Radical Democracy: The burglary of the FBI office took place 45 years ago, but you had been involved in Movement work for many years before that. Could you talk about what first led you to become involved in social activism in general, and peace activism in particular?

Bonnie Raines: I grew up in the very conventional, very parochial, small city of Grand Rapids, Michigan — not exactly a hotbed of progressive activity. But my family was a quite unconventional, and not too interested in materialism and country clubs and the usual stuff, so we were a bit of a bohemian family in that city.

I have one uncle who's a classical pianist, a brother who was a musician, another uncle who's a painter, and my childhood was spent in a little different vein than most friends of mine. And we belonged to a large, nondenominational church downtown that was sort of the liberal bastion in that city. It's called Fountain Street Church, and was very instrumental in, I guess you could say, my moral formation.

RD: What do you mean by “moral formation?”

BR: Very early on **I began to understand that if you're going to become a responsible citizen, you can't just sit back and expect that someone else is going to take care of our**

democracy and take care of things that are obviously very wrong. I remember vividly that Eleanor Roosevelt was touring the Midwest at that time, and she was planning on coming to Grand Rapids. There was a big brouhaha about where she would speak, who would welcome her. A lot of people did not approve of her and were very critical of her. It was a ridiculous thing, but it meant that our church was the one place that would welcome her.

I remember sitting down in front and listening and looking at her intently, and I wondered why she would come to our small city that did not seem to understand or appreciate her status. Many years later, I realized she was specifically sending her message to small communities like ours, showing that you did not have to have a big stage to make a difference. I remember her talking about

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segregation in the North — Grand Rapids was so rigidly divided by race, but also with respect to the so-called "white trash." I must've been about fourteen years old and remember just being so impressed with her courage and her speaking out. That was a significant moment: I decided I'd like to find a way to be that kind of a woman when I grew up.

RD: Eventually you and your husband John settled near Philadelphia. Can you talk about the Movement scene there? What sort of things you were involved in, leading up to the break-in?

BR: On the one hand we were doing all the things that everyone else across the country was doing to try and bring the Vietnam War to an end — the rallies and petitions, the buses to Washington. Speaking out, teach-ins, things that were going on all across the country. But they were leading nowhere. Nowhere.

We began to understand that the government was lying to us about the casualties in that war — military and civilian — and the atrocities being committed. We were being lied to. That's when I took an abrupt turn away from those generic things you do to bring about change, and began to focus on a form of disruption to block certain aspects of that horrible war.

Philadelphia was a center — because of the Quakers, the Catholic Left, and all the colleges and universities. We began to gravitate toward the idea that we could try to disrupt the draft and slow the war machine, and do it in a way that was covert. That's where we began to finally concentrate our energies.

There were also people in our neighborhood who were, for example, hiding young men who had gone AWOL, or protecting them from having to be drafted. It took several forms in our part of the city, but we were drawn to the religious protests and the Catholic Left because that was a form of disobedience that was still nonviolent, but was disruptive.

RD: Like breaking into draft boards?

BR: Yes. We participated in that here in Philadelphia. There were over three hundred draft raids across the country, some successful and some not. Our strategy was to case the draft board, in North Philadelphia. We targeted a draft board in the poorest section of the city because they were drafting the poorest young men. We spent a long time casing the building and doing our planning. Then we broke in — in the middle of the night — and removed as many files as we could, and burned them. Before we burned them, we notified the young

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men who were 1-A, and therefore going to be drafted. We notified them that their files had been destroyed and that, therefore, they probably would not be contacted. Of course everything at that point was a paper system. If you destroyed the paper, you could really disrupt the system.

RD: You talked about the moment you realized the government was straight-up lying about the war. How did that realization affect you?

BR: Well, **I mean, we're a democracy. We're not supposed to operate that way.** Even if you oppose a war, you assume that huge systematic lying isn't going to take place, or if it does, it will be revealed in some way or another. We were opposed to the war from the very beginning. We at least had the information that people needed in order to see through the façade of the justification for that war.

But then it became clear that it was almost a criminal act of lying and deceiving the American public, whose sons were being sent over there, whose tax dollars were paying for this war. It just seemed criminal to us.

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RD: Can you talk about the decision to escalate the disruption one step further?

BR: Philadelphia was a center of activity, but we didn't think they were paying as much attention here as in Berkeley, for example. **We knew phones were being tapped, people were being followed, cameras were taking your picture everywhere.** And what we began to understand, which seemed even more serious, were the informants being planted and the heavy-handed surveillance we were beginning to be aware of. **You didn't need to be paranoid to realize the government was really turning up the heat.**

So it began to be as important to us as ending the war — to protect the right to dissent, and not allow massive, secret surveillance to suppress it. That became a driving principle for us, particularly for Bill Davedon, who articulated that for the rest of us. Lots of people knew what was going on and would look around their meetings and say, “I wonder who is the informant here tonight?” *[laughs]* It was a common-held belief that we were being surveyed in a massive, secret way that was not only immoral, it was illegal.

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But we didn't know how to prove it. You could say again and again that this is happening and it's wrong, but unless you could get evidence of that you couldn't really confront it. It was Bill's idea to see if we could identify an FBI office in the area that we thought would have documents related to the surveillance, and try to get those, and get them out to the public.

Our house was often the setting for meetings and plans, and in the beginning I felt a little like the den mother of the groups meeting there. They stayed at our house and I'd wash their towels and feed them spaghetti and meatballs, and I would sit in on the meetings and the discussions, but I always felt a little marginalized. **To be really honest, in those days in "the Movement," as we called it, women were second-class citizens. The men were the active leaders and making most of the decisions. And I began to resent that.** I began to think, I don't have to accept this kind of a role if I can figure out a way that John and I can do this together — with the least amount of jeopardy for our children.

RD: You certainly picked an impressive way to prove your point. The burglary, along with the Pentagon papers and Watergate, exposed lying and criminality at the highest levels, and we've never looked at the federal government the same way since.

BR: I think it did bring awareness. Probably a fair amount of cynicism, too. It also hammered home the idea that it's up to regular citizens to protect their democracy. **We are the protectors of democracy, and you can't depend on the powers in Washington to necessarily share the power.**

We've had to depend on whistleblowers throughout history. That notion, going right up to Snowden's actions, is seen as something that needs to take place in a democracy. Hopefully at the right moments it will take place. But once the whistle blows, you have to be concerned about what impact that is going to have. And there are going to be certain entities in Washington that are always going to resist the people who say, "You have to be truthful, you have to be transparent, because this is a democracy, remember?"

That notion has become much more prevalent in people's minds: the idea that we need whistleblowers to hold the powers accountable. It shouldn't have to work that way, but unfortunately it does. **At the time we broke into the FBI building, there wasn't going to be anybody inside the government to blow a whistle. It just wasn't going to happen.**

For quite a while I think Hoover felt that somebody inside had engineered that burglary. He couldn't believe that people from outside could get away with it — and that he couldn't catch them.

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RD: Right — whistleblowing as an intrinsic part of democracy. In a republic like ours, our representatives go to Washington, and the bureaucracy and processes are quite opaque. Someone has to be willing to stand up and yank the curtain aside, or turn the lights on, otherwise you end up in some very scary places.

BR: Exactly. We see the direction that [Richard] Nixon, for example, was wanting to go, something close to a secret police. So, whistleblowing is necessary. When people ask about Snowden, and they always do, I like to say that I think his parents raised him right. Because he saw something that was very wrong and realized he was in a position to do something to correct it.

RD: Exactly. In a way, that's the impetus for everyone who gets involved in the movement: seeing something is wrong and feeling obligated to help correct it.

What do you hope someone today might take away from your life story as a movement activist?

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BR: First of all, the principle that “We, the people,” remain the final arbiters of our democratic values. That’s the bottom line, and you can be empowered by that. Not only empowered, but compelled to commit to a form of social change that you commit to over the longer term. Then you have to find away to associate yourself with others doing the same.

I think that activism is for me a natural expression of your responsibility as a citizen. You can’t depend on others being willing to get out there and take the risks and put themselves on the line. Because in the end, we are “We, the people.”

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